

# *Wiping Out Our Legal Indebtedness to God Colossians: 2:13-14*

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God **made you alive** with Christ. He **forgave us all our sins**,<sup>14</sup> having **canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness** [*cheirographon*, “our sins”], which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)

The above citation is often misapplied by many sincere and devout believers. Unfortunately, this Scripture is cited to teach that the Law of God was nailed to the Cross of Jesus in AD 33. The KJV renders 2:14: “Blotting out the **handwriting of ordinances** (*δόγμα, dogma*) that was **against us**, which was **contrary to us**, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.” In my analysis of Paul’s words to the Colossians (2:13-14), I will seek to unravel this text with an analysis of two Greek words that are frequently misunderstood. These two Greek words are: (1) *χειρόγραφον, cheirographon* (pronounced: *kay-rä-grä-fun*), and (2) *δόγμα, dogma* (pronounced: *dog-mä*).<sup>1</sup> On the word *δόγμασιν*, Eduard Lohse pens the following comments on differentiating between “handwriting” and “ordinances”:

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<sup>1</sup> I first became aware of the Greek word *χειρόγραφον* in my first or second year of Greek reading. I had to translate the Book of Colossians (1972). As a result of this exercise of translating, I had to reexamine my earlier teaching. Hopefully, this in-depth study will enhance your security of eternal life “in” and “through” the sacrifice of Christ. In this examination, I cite numerous scholarly sources to enhance one’s understanding of what God accomplished for us on the Cross of Jesus. Also, many of my citations, from numerous authors, have footnotes within the various exerts. I have left these footnotes for the benefit of my readers in their own research.

The words “because of the regulations” (τοῖς δόγμασιν, *tois dogmasin*) occur unconnectedly in the middle of the sentence.<sup>105</sup> the word “regulations” (δόγματα) does not mean the stipulations of an edict of grace,<sup>106</sup> but **binding statutes**. Thus, the words “because of the regulations” (τοῖς δόγμασιν) **indicate why the “certificate of indebtedness” has a case against us.**<sup>107</sup> It is, therefore, not impossible to connect “because of the regulations” directly with “certificate of indebtedness” and to supply a supposed participle “written” (γεγραμμένον)<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

**It is possible that the English word “ordinances” represent the charges found in the “handwriting.”** On the other hand, even if the word “ordinances” represent the “Law,” it is not the Law that is nailed to the Cross, but rather the IOU (*cheirographon*), which “handwriting” represents “**our legal indebtedness**” that is pictured in the word *cheirographon*. If the word *ordinances* represent the Law, this interpretation only demonstrates that the Law is the force behind **our legal indebtedness** (our IOU) that cannot be paid by us. Only God can pay the IOU, which is against us and contrary to us. God Himself had to cancel the charge against us. There is not one Scripture that teaches that the Law was nailed to the Cross. The **Scripture does teach** that “our legal indebtedness” to the Law was nailed to the Cross. This nailing to the Cross concerning our IOU is a picture of GRACE in action.

For a second time, It is not uncommon for Christians to cite this section of Scripture (2:13-14) without an in-depth investigation as to what Paul meant by his phraseology. Frequently, believers in Christ are locked into a peculiar tunnel vision of how to unravel Paul’s intent. What is your opinion about this pericope (unit or section of Scripture)? Is your interpretation based upon the context or is it based on inherited tradition? Question: Why is a critical understanding of Colossians 2:14 necessary for a proper understanding of eschatology (“last days” of the nation of Israel)? For instance, Isaiah (739 BC, Chapter 53) foretold the event that Paul wrote about in AD 62. The following comments by Isaiah is an excellent commentary on Colossians 2:13-14:

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<sup>105</sup> Moule, ad loc., correctly says: “The dative τοῖς δόγμασιν is problematic.” For the history of exegesis of this passage cf. Ernest Best, *A Historical Study of the Exegesis of Col 2, 14*, Unpub. Diss. Gregoriana (Rome: 1956). Cf. further the survey in Masson, ad loc.

<sup>106</sup> Thus, Bengel, *Gnomon*, ad loc.: “decrees of grace” (decreta gratiae).

<sup>107</sup> Eph 2:15\* is formulated more clearly than Col 2:14\*: “by abolishing the law of commandments and regulations” (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν καταργήσας).

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 109.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who of his generation protested? **For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.** <sup>9</sup> He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. <sup>11</sup> After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. <sup>12</sup> Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because **he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.** (Isaiah 53:8-12)

The traditional view of 2:14 advances the belief that the Law was nailed to the Cross. Needless to say, this interpretation contradicts Jesus' words in His Sermon on the Mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until **heaven and earth disappear [the Old Covenant World of Judaism], not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.** (AD 70, Matthew 5:17-18; see also Luke 21:20-24)

Following the Crucifixion of Jesus, it was thirty-seven years before "everything was accomplished" that was foretold by the prophets, which total fulfillment occurred with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Contrary to what many Christians are teaching, we are not living in the "last days" that Joel addressed in 835 BC (see Joel 2:28-32). The fulfillment of Joel's prophecy occurred in the first century (see, Matthew 10:23; 16:28; 24:34). Luke gives additional information in his Gospel that adds clarity to Matthew 5:17-18. Luke pens the following words concerning the overthrow of Jerusalem in AD 70:

**When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies,** you will know that its desolation is near. <sup>21</sup> Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. <sup>22</sup> **For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.** <sup>23</sup> How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. <sup>24</sup> They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. **Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.** (Luke 21:20-24; 42 months—See Daniel 12:7; Revelation 11:1-3; 12:6, 14)

Jesus stated emphatically that the Law would not pass away until everything the prophets wrote about would be fulfilled.<sup>3</sup> The Law was not nailed to the Cross in AD 33, but the *cheirographon* (“our legal indebtedness”) was nailed to the Cross, otherwise the first century believers, as well as we, would still be “dead” in our sins. Peter on the Day of Pentecost identified the prophecy of Joel as the “last days” of Israel (first century) as a political power (see also Daniel 12:7; Revelation 11:1-4). The Book of Hebrews, written around AD 65/68, also, identified the “last days” beginning with the ministry of Jesus (AD 30): “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,<sup>2</sup> but in these **last days** [ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν, “last of these days”] he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he **made the universe**” (Hebrews 1:1-2). The English word *universe* is not an accurate translation of the Greek word αἰών (*aiōn*). The Greek text is: ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας (*epoiēsen tous aiōnas*, “He made **the ages**”)<sup>4</sup>

The *cheirographon* (“handwriting” or “our legal indebtedness”) has to do with a certificate of indebtedness, that is to say an “IOU” that we, as individuals, could not pay. The χειρόγραφον, (*cheirographon*, “IOU”) **received its force of condemnation from the Law**. As a result of this dilemma of condemnation, Jesus, in His sacrificial death, nailed our IOU to His Cross, which only God could supply. The Law was **not** nailed to the Cross. For example, in AD 57, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, from Corinth, concerning the Law: “Do we, then, **nullify the law by this faith? Not at all!** Rather, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31). Again, Paul writes: “So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (7:21). Once more, “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law” (7:22). For a fourth time, an excellent commentary on the meaning of the “handwriting” in Colossians 2:14 is presented by Paul in his Epistle to the Christians in Rome (written about five years before the Book of Colossians):

**But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify** (see Matthew 5:17-18 and Luke 21:20-24).

<sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,<sup>23</sup> **for all have sinned and fall short of the**

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<sup>3</sup> I highly recommend Don Preston, *The End of Torah: A Debate on When the Mosaic Law Passed Away—Don Preston versus Kurt Simmons* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Management, Inc., 2011). Also see, Don K. Preston, *AD 70: A Shadow of the ‘Real’ End?* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Management, Inc., 2013)

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed study of the “last days,” see Don Preston, *The Last Days Identified* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Productions, 2004). See also Dallas Burdette, “Last Days in the Old and New Testament, in Dallas Burdette, *Commentary on the Book of Revelation: An Unraveling of the Olivet discourse As Preface to Understanding Revelation, Vol. 1* (Mainland, FL: Xulon Press), 90-125.

glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus [Jesus “canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness”].<sup>25</sup> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement [He dismissed the IOU], through the shedding of Jesus’ blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith.<sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.<sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,<sup>30</sup> since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. (Romans 3:21-30)

God the Father presented Jesus as a sacrifice of “**atonement**” in order to pay the debt (IOU) that we as individuals could not pay. In other words, Jesus “wiped out” the IOU that was **against us** (**καθ’ ἡμῶν**, *kath hēmōn*) that originated from the force or power of the Law, which law demanded perfection. Once more, Paul went right to the heart of the matter concerning the power of the Law:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God [our IOU].<sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. (Romans 3:19-20)

With Jesus, a new basis of life had been laid through Him. One can only stand on the ground of God’s actions “in” and “through” Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross for our debt (IOU). Our sins are silenced since Jesus “wiped out” our transgression on the Cross. Paul expressed God’s action concerning humanity’s dilemma concerning the “handwriting” (IOU) that was against us: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). James D. G. Dunn’s<sup>5</sup> comments are right on target as

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<sup>5</sup> **James D. G. Dunn** (1939–) is emeritus Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham and is a leading British New Testament scholar. Dunn is a significant proponent of the New Perspective on Paul, and coined the term in a 1982 lecture. He received a PhD and DD from the University of Cambridge, and a MA and BD from the University of Glasgow. In 2002 he became only the third British scholar to be made the president of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas. His recent works include *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence*, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*, the volumes *Romans 1–8* and *Romans 9–16* of the Word Biblical Commentary, and *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* in The New International Greek Testament Commentary (12 vols.).

he seeks to unravel the thought behind the Greek word **χειρόγραφον**, (*cheirographon*):

**This is important, since the act of redemption on the cross under this imagery effects a wiping out of the χειρόγραφον** [*cheirographon, kay-rä-grä-fun*]. The verb ἐξαιείφω [*exaleiphō, x-ä-lay-foe*] is the natural one to use in the context, **since it denotes the erasure of an entry in a book**, and is so used in several of the above contexts (Exod. 32:32–33; Ps. 69:28; *1 Enoch* 108:3; *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* 7:8 [*chirographum* as the object]; *Testament of Abraham* [E] 11:10; Rev. 3:5). **The expunging of the record confirms that none of these transgressions is any longer held “against us.”** That does not mean, however, that the underlying decrees or regulations cease to have force, that is, that the law no longer functions as God’s yardstick of right and judgment; there is no contradiction here with Rom. 2:12–16. **It is simply that the record of the transgressions has been erased**—another way of saying “he forgave us all our transgressions”<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

In other words, the *cheirographon* (*kay-rä-grä-fun*) is the certificate of indebtedness that we owe but cannot pay. Colossians 2:13 sets the stage for a more perfect understanding of this unique Greek word. Paul writes: “When you were **dead in your sins** and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God **made you alive** with Christ. He **forgave** (ἐξαιείφω [*exaleiphō*, “wiping out”) us **all** our sins.” Paul W. Deterding,<sup>7</sup> too, expressed the meaning behind the word *cheirographon*, which commentary captures the very heart of Colossians 2:13-14:

**2:14** ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν—ἐξαιείφω [*exaleiphō*] can mean to “erase” (BDAG, 1 b) or “to remove so as to leave no trace, ... **the blotting out of a written record**” (BDAG, 2). **Paul here pictures our trespasses as a written bill of debt. Χειρόγραφον** [*cheirographon*] is a term referring to a **handwritten document**, but it often serves as a technical term for a

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<sup>6</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 166.

<sup>7</sup> **Paul E. Deterding** is pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church and School in Carson City, Nevada, a position he has held since March of 2000. He has served as pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church of Satellite Beach, Florida (now Risen Savior Lutheran Church of Palm Bay, Florida), from 1981 to 1994 and as pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Jackson, Mississippi, from 1994 to 2000. He has also served as a guest lecturer at both Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

BDAG Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000

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**certificate of indebtedness.**<sup>24</sup> This debt to be erased is “with regulations” (τοῖς δόγμασιν, a dative of respect), that is, **our trespasses are violations of the regulations of God’s Law** (see Eph 2:15).<sup>25</sup> This bill of indebtedness is called the “bond against us [καθ’ ἡμῶν] ... which was opposed to us [ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν].” The latter prepositional phrase (ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, *hypenantion hēmin*, “contrary to us”) points beyond the mere fact of indebtedness to the wrath of God against our sins<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

Once more, I wish to cite further comments on “forgiveness and triumph” on 2:14-15 in which Deterding further elucidates the meaning of *cheirographon*:

By picturing our trespasses, which Christ forgives, **as a bill of debt standing against us** Paul thereby indicates that this “bond” is an obligation that must be met to satisfy divine justice (2:14). **The apostle depicts the forgiveness of this debt as the erasure (or blotting out) of the bill;** God himself forgives it through Christ’s death on the cross. Jesus’ manner of death—crucifixion, **being nailed to the cross with the charge against him affixed to the cross on a tablet that could be erased or blotted over**<sup>54</sup>—is the source of the vivid word picture Paul invents here.<sup>55</sup> **Christ is thereby described as one who on the cross accepted the guilt and penalty of our trespasses to remove them from us.**<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis mine, bold and underlining)

When traditions represent inherited interpretations, it is essential that we go back to the drawing board, so to speak, and reexamine what we were taught from our forefathers. In order to reevaluate the traditional interpretation of 2:14, it is necessary to examine the details or word meanings in light of the context. There are three basic rules to correct interpretation: (1) CONTEXT, (2) CONTEXT, and (3) CONTEXT. There are also three rules to learning: (1) REPETITION (2) REPETITION, and (3) REPETITION. The correct or accurate method of exegesis also demands “audience relevance” as a means of precise interpretation. Even though I have cited some scholars above, I wish to cite another scholar’s exegesis (Scot McKnight<sup>10</sup>) on 2:14, which citation captures the fundamental meaning of this “handwriting” that was **against us and contrary to us**:

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<sup>24</sup> Numerous illustrations are given in BDAG and especially MM, 687.

<sup>25</sup> Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe*, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 2003), 96.

<sup>54</sup> Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 86; Moule, *Colossians*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 2003), 107–108.

<sup>10</sup> **Scot McKnight** is a theologian who has focused most of his writings on the New Testament and the historical Jesus. He is currently a professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, IL. He earned a B.A. degree from Grand Rapids

The second dimension of **new creation** now appears: “having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us.” There are here four facts at work in this clause. First, there is a handwritten note, contract, or charge. **The term *cheirographon*<sup>134</sup> refers to a commonly known handwritten document that, in this context, refers to a certificate of indebtedness, a receipt or a contract confessed to and signed by a debtor.**<sup>135</sup> Such a document is behind the parable of the shrewd manager told by Jesus (Luke 16:1–9).<sup>11</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold)

I suggest that every reader of this essay read, if possible, the whole of the various commentaries cited in this article on Colossians 2:13-14. As stated above, there are three laws to learning (repetition). The following citation should heighten our understanding of the traditional interpretation versus Paul’s intent in our interpretation of 2:13-14. I encourage each reader to pay special attention to the next quote by McKnight, which will illustrate the focus of Paul’s intent:

Paul now expresses the same idea of forgiveness in slightly different terms: “he has taken it [the *cheirographon*] away, nailing it to the cross.”<sup>153</sup> It is not that two acts are performed—first erasing and then taking away—but one major act (new creation) explored in various ways. The word “away” deserves some attention, translating the common Greek expression *ek tou mesou* [“out of the way”]. This term evokes presence or proximity [“closeness”], where the *cheirographon* looms as an accusing finger, like the ghost in Dickens’s *Christmas Carol*. But in God’s grace this accusing voice in our midst has been lifted and taken away.

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<sup>134</sup> BDAG 1083; *EDNT* 3:464; Barth and Blanke, 369–72. *TLNT* 3:508–10 provides details for how the term was used in the papyri. Debts, once paid, were canceled by making an X on the receipt (509). The language in our text, though, is not about an X but about erasing or scraping off the debt from the papyrus sheet.

<sup>135</sup> Joram Luttenberger, “Der gekreuzigte Schuldsein: Ein Aspekt der Deutung des Todes Jesu im Kolosserbrief,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 80–95.

<sup>11</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 246–247.

<sup>153</sup> καὶ αὐτὸ ἦρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ. The perfect tense of ἦρκεν depicts the action of taking away or lifting away as vividly present; Hatina, “Perfect-Tense Form in Colossians,” 240–41. Campbell calls this a “historical perfect” (40) and evokes heightened proximity. The notion of “away” (NIV) comes from ἐκ τοῦ μέσου in this verse (cf. Matt 13:49; 1 Cor 5:2; 2 Thess 2:7; Acts 23:10).

How? God has lifted the accusing *cheirographon* from our presence by nailing<sup>154</sup> it to an instrument of punishment: the cross. One cannot avoid the temptation of thinking that Paul here speaks of the *titulus* on the cross,<sup>155</sup> the accusation pinned to the cross on which criminals were crucified to announce to all who can read it the charges against the person. Normally, one nailed accusations to the cross in order to condemn, but here the nailing of the accusation to the cross releases the person from those accusations. How so? The innocent one [Jesus], as we see in 2 Cor 5:21, assumes the charges against the guilty ones so that the guilty ones might become innocent. We thus have here **vicarious, substitutionary atonement**. Jesus shoulders the accusations against us so we need not experience their consequences in death.<sup>12</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold)

The word **vicarious** (vī-'ker-ē-əs) means something that is performed or suffered by one person as a substitute for another or to the benefit or advantage of another. On the Cross, Jesus became our “substitutionary atonement.” The following comments by Douglas J. Moo<sup>13</sup> also adds clarity or transparency concerning the *cheirographon* by Paul in 2:14:

**14** The forgiveness that we enjoy in Christ is total: “*all* our sins” are forgiven (v. 13). The completeness and definitiveness of our forgiveness are the theme of v. 14, which Paul presents via two striking word pictures. **Paul’s first word picture portrays a document that all human beings have signed, an “IOU,” in which we pledge complete allegiance to God.** Our sins stand as conclusive evidence that we have failed to give God that allegiance, and so that **document** [“IOU”] is “against us” and “condemns” us. But God has taken that document [“IOU”] and wiped it clean; indeed, he has taken it completely out of the picture. He has, in fact, in a second word picture that both highlights the completeness of the removal and the means by which it

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<sup>154</sup> προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ; see BDAG 880. Harris sees the participle as modal (the debt is removed by nailing it to the cross). Pao (170–71) debates the appropriateness—if the χειρόγραφον refers to the Torah—of it being nailed to the cross.

<sup>155</sup> Caird, 195; Wright, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, 250–251.

<sup>13</sup> **Dr. Douglas Moo** teaches New Testament at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. For over 20 years, his ministry was based at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. His academic interests revolve around the interface of exegesis and theology. Dr. Moo seeks to model to students a rigorous approach to the Greek text that always asks the “so what” questions of ultimate significance and application. The Pauline and general epistles have been his special focus within the NT canon. In the next few years, he will be writing commentaries on Galatians and Hebrews, a Pauline theology, and a theological and practical book on creation care. Dr. Moo has also been active in his local church, serving as elder most years, teaching and preaching to the church, and conducting home Bible studies. Because of his New Testament expertise, he has served on the Committee on Bible Translation—the group of scholars charged with revising the text of the NIV and with producing the TNIV.

was accomplished, “nailed it to the cross.” The third stanza of Horatio Spafford’s hymn “It Is Well with My Soul” beautifully captures the point of the verse:

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!<sup>14</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and information included in brackets [])

The **δόγμα** (*dogma*, *dog-mä*) of 2:14 appears to be the Law, which Law is the driving force behind the **χειρόγραφον** (*cheirographon*, *kay-rä-grä-fun*). Moo is also on target, so it seems to me, as he writes about both Greek words:

A preferable interpretation, then, is to view the “decrees” as explaining the reason why the “IOU” was “against us.”<sup>94</sup> All we humans had, as it were, “signed” an IOU promising God perfect obedience, and this document has come to stand against us “because” of God’s “decrees” that we have failed to keep. Paul emphasizes the negative verdict of the IOU by stating it twice: it *stood against us* and *condemned us* (more literally, “was opposed to us”).<sup>95</sup>

In the Greek text, a *kai* (“and,” “now”) breaks the flow of Paul’s syntax in the middle of v. 14. TNIV represents the break with a semicolon (cf. also RSV; NASB NJB; REB); other versions start a new sentence here (ESV; NLT; NET).<sup>96</sup> The basic flow of vv. 13–14, then, runs as follows: “**God has made alive with Christ us who were dead by forgiving our sins, in that he has cancelled the IOU; in fact, God removed this IOU from the situation by nailing it to the cross.**” Both the syntax and the wording of this last clause lend it emphasis. “Removed from the situation” is my translation of a Greek idiom that has the sense “take out of the midst”;<sup>97</sup> in this

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 208.

<sup>94</sup> O’Brien, 125; Lohse, 109; Barth/Blanke, 329–30.

<sup>95</sup> Harris surmises that the second phrase extends the former by emphasizing the “active hostility” of the IOU (p. 108).

TNIV Today’s New International Version

RSV Revised Standard Version

NASB New American Standard Bible (rev. ed.)

NJB New Jerusalem Bible

REB Revised English Bible

ESV English Standard Version

NLT New Living Translation

NET Neotestamentica

<sup>96</sup> This *καί* makes it unlikely that the participle *ἐξαλείψας* (“having cancelled”) at the beginning of the verse modifies the verb *ἔθηκεν* (“he has taken”) (contra HCSB; NAB).

<sup>97</sup> The combination of the verb *αἶρω* and *ἐκ [τοῦ] μέσου* occurs elsewhere in Paul only in 1 Cor. 5:2, where he demands the removal of a notorious sinner “from the midst” of the

context, it may highlight the fact that the IOU has no more bearing on our “case.” It is by “nailing it to the cross” that the IOU has been decisively removed from having any power over us. The imagery probably has nothing to do with any ancient means of canceling debts<sup>98</sup> but arises from the actual nature of Christ’s crucifixion.<sup>99</sup> In causing him to be nailed to the cross, God (the subject of the verb) has provided for the full cancellation of the debt of obedience that we had incurred. Christ took upon himself the penalty that we were under because of our disobedience, and his death fully satisfied God’s necessary demand for due punishment of that disobedience.<sup>15</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold)

Even though I have cited from numerous authors above, there is a reason for such duplication. By citing from different sources, each author adds additional light, which rephrasing enhances comprehension of the subject under discussion. For instance, Eduard Lohse’s<sup>16</sup> explanation of Paul’s remarks are crystal clear as to the significance of the word *cheirographon*:

**14\*** The debtor issues a certificate of indebtedness in his own hand as an acknowledgement of his outstanding debts....the “certificate of indebtedness” tells about man’s condition of indebtedness before God. It accuses us, as both “**which stood against us**” (τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν) and “**which was against us**” (ὁ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν) expressly state.<sup>104</sup> The words “**because of the regulations**” (τοῖς δόγμασιν) occur

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Corinthian congregation. The same prepositional phrase, with different verbs, occurs in Matt. 13:49; Acts 17:33; 23:10; 2 Cor. 6:17; 2 Thess. 2:7.

<sup>98</sup> Contra Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: Doran, 1927), 332, who thought that the allusion may have been to the custom of canceling a bond by crossing it out with the Greek letter χ.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. John 20:25, which refers to the “marks” on Jesus’ hands made by the nails.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 211–212.

<sup>16</sup> **Eduard Lohse** is a well-loved biblical scholar and theologian.

\* <sup>14</sup> erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

<sup>104</sup> The twice-repeated stress on the hostile character of “certificate of indebtedness” overloads the sentence. The phrase “which was against us” (ὁ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν) is appended to the expression “the certificate of indebtedness which stood against us” (τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον) as an interpretative clarification. (Cf. also Schille, *Frühchristliche Hymnen*, 33: “The phrase ‘which stood against us’ in v 14\* seems; to be a gloss.”) Nevertheless, the entire sentence—including the relative clause “which was against us”—must have belonged to the material used by the author of Col, since he, in turn, supplies a new accentuation with the words “because of the regulations” (τοῖς δόγμασιν). Cf. above p. 106; on “against” (ὑπεναντίος) cf. below p. 110, p. 119.

unconnectedly in the middle of the sentence.<sup>105</sup> The word “regulations” (δόγματα) does not mean the stipulations of an edict of grace,<sup>106</sup> but binding statutes. **Thus, the words “because of the regulations” (τοῖς δόγμασιν) indicate why the “certificate of indebtedness” has a case against us.**<sup>107</sup> It is, therefore, not impossible to connect “because of the regulations” directly with “certificate of indebtedness” and to supply a supposed participle “written” (γεγραμμένον)<sup>17</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

## CONCLUSION

The exact meanings of the words “written decree” (χειρόγραφον, *cheirographon*) and “regulations” (δόγμασιν, *dogmasin*) remain a subject of scholarly debate. Most agree that “written decree” is taken from the fields of commerce and law in reference to a “certificate of debt” (NASB; cf. ESV, NLT, TNIV, NET, NIV),<sup>89</sup> and in this context would refer to an IOU from human beings to God.<sup>90</sup> This meaning is supported by the widespread use of this term in contemporaneous papyri<sup>91</sup> and would be immediately understood as such by the ancient readers [audience relevance].<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Moule, ad loc., correctly says: “The dative τοῖς δόγμασιν is problematic.” For the history of exegesis of this passage cf. Ernest Best, *A Historical Study of the Exegesis of Col 2, 14*, Unpub. Diss. Gregoriana (Rome: 1956). Cf. further the survey in Masson, ad loc.

<sup>106</sup> Thus, Bengel, *Gnomon*, ad loc.: “decrees of grace” (*decreta gratiae*).

<sup>107</sup> Eph 2:15\* is formulated more clearly than Col 2:14\*: “by abolishing the law of commandments and regulations” (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν καταργήσας).

<sup>17</sup> Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 108. Do we remember the word *repetition*? I cited this citation at the beginning of my essay. Hopefully, this citation will seal the true interpretation of Colossians 2:13-14.

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<sup>89</sup> See Joram Luttenberger, “Der gekreuzigte Schuldschein: Ein Aspekt der Deutung des Todes Jesu im Kolosserbrief,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 80–95. Kreitzer, “Living in the Lycus Valley,” 92, further suggests that this “image of debt-cancellation may be a deliberate allusion to the tax relief granted by the Roman state following the earthquake of 60 CE.”

<sup>90</sup> This derivative meaning finds its parallel in inscriptional evidence from Asia Minor that points to an “autographed self-condemnation” (Wesley Carr, “Two Notes on Colossians,” *JTS* 24 [1973]: 494).

<sup>91</sup> MM, 687.

<sup>18</sup> David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 170. **David W. Pao** received his PhD from Harvard University, and is a professor of New Testament and chair of the New Testament Department at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the author of *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus, Thanksgiving: An*

Colossians 2:13-14 should create within us a heart of praise. Only when we recognize that grace is incomprehensible is it grace. In Christ, God entered humanity; in Christ, eternity entered time. When God cancelled our IOU (the certificate of indebtedness), He credited to our account His righteousness. This “righteousness” is **furnished** by God, **devised** by God, and **made available** by God. This righteousness is outside of men and women. In the “old age” (the Covenant World of Judaism), humanity was under condemnation, that is to say, under God’s wrath. On the other hand, the “new age” is the age of grace. We are now a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

As Christians, we work **from justification, not to it**. Remember, God’s righteousness is outside of us. What Jesus accomplished on the Cross is God’s **imputed righteousness**, which is the *doing* and *dying* of Jesus upon the Cross. Colossians 2:13-14 is an excellent commentary upon God’s actions “in” and “through” Christ. In Christ, God took His own judgment upon Himself. The Cross gives God the Father and God the Son as examples of their love. God, by His very Nature, must either punish sin or expiate it (make atonement; 2:13-14). Over again, I call attention to the Book of Romans in which Paul explains why Christ had to die in order to cancel our “certificate of indebtedness” (IOU):

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.<sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.<sup>25</sup> **God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.**<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith.<sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.<sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,<sup>30</sup> since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.<sup>31</sup> **Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.** (Romans 3:21-31)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>I highly recommend Don Preston’s UTube video concerning the nature of the Parousia, which is titled: “11-27-20: Proving the Nature of the Parousia”-- [\(259\) 11-27-20-Proving The Nature of The Parousia - YouTube](#). This lecture also deals with the Law.

Finally, I wish to cite, once more, from David Pao on the participle “nailing,” which comments should enhance further our understanding of this study:

The participle “nailing” indicates the means through which the written decree is obliterated: “by nailing it to the cross” (NJB, NLT, NET). The reference to “the cross” points back to “the blood of his cross” in the christological hymn (1:20). The thought that Jesus’ death on the cross cancelled that which is against us recalls a similar note concerning one’s deliverance from God’s wrath: “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be **saved from God’s wrath through him!**” (Rom 5:9).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 171–172. I have purposely left the inserted footnotes within the documents cited for the benefit of the reader.